

2025 ACC Football Championship Game: Virginia vs. Duke

Friday, December 5, 2025

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Bank of America Stadium

Duke Blue Devils

Manny Diaz

Press Conference



Q. Can you speak on the importance of Jeremiah Hasley and how he's come on in the month of November? He had the injury last year in the Northwestern game, and the month of November he's just been a big help offensively.

MANNY DIAZ: Really I think the catchers have shown up in November, but what he's done all season long has been, in my mind, at an All-Conference level. He's certainly a great pass receiver down the field. Darian has got great trust in him. But the dirty work he does in the run game -- when you talk about our run game and what our offensive line does, he's really an extension of those guys.

Tight ends are such great chess pieces. They're matchup issues. Jerry just gives us a lot of flexibility with what we can do on offense.

Q. J'Mari Taylor had, I think, 133 against you guys the first time that you played. He's been sort of the backbone of their offense and what they want to do. Did you learn anything from playing against them the first time? Not to give away state secrets here probably, but that you would maybe want to do a little bit differently in this second meeting against them?

MANNY DIAZ: The majority of that was on the one option on a third down and short, which we didn't play very well. But I think the lesson from that is he's got great explosive potential. You knew all along, you watch his whole body of work: Runs with great power. He's a tackle breaker when he gets into the secondary. He can run guys over. In our game he shows that he's got the speed. If we just misfit one play, he's got a chance to go all the way.

We felt like we played the run well in the first half, but that was really a back breaker in the second half. You've got to do it every down because he's got the ability to punish you

if you don't.

Q. What did you see with Mitchell Melton? You guys have prepared for him twice now, the Virginia defensive end. He's been in the backfield quite frequently for them. What do you see that makes him a tough matchup and a tough player to prepare for?

MANNY DIAZ: We think both of their defensive ends were a difficult matchup, in a matchup we felt like they won in the first game. The first thing is you see high motor. Those guys play extraordinarily hard. They can beat you, number one, with their athleticism and their ability. But even if you have a chance to slow them down, they don't ever stop. They've done a nice job with their coverage and making your quarterback hold onto the ball, and then they're able to finish with effort sacks.

We lost the sack game in the first game. That was a big deal. Again, they've got a lot of guys, their defense has been outstanding. The last six games of the year, it's hard to get to 20 points on these guys, and I think the front play is a big part of that.

Q. You have a chance to win the ACC this year. This would be Duke's first ACC title since 1989 and their first outright since 1962. You seem familiar with the history of the program, a lot of similarities between this year and '89. That team was 6-1, they swept the state, high powered offense. As a guy who, again, seems to respect and understand the tradition and excellence of this program, what does it mean to you to already be in year 2 in the upper echelon of Duke football head coaches and be up there with guys like Steve Spurrier?

MANNY DIAZ: It was pretty cool to get a text from the Old Ball Coach -- well, a voicemail from the Old Ball Coach to start the week. Trust me, he's fully aware it was a split with Virginia in '89 and can actually recite all the things that made that happen.

Look, I'm really proud of this team because we have endured some difficult things. As I mentioned before, we stayed in the fight. We've been persistent and resilient,

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and we've earned the right to be here. Six conference wins, which also has not been done at Duke in a long time.

Again, when we say has not been done at Duke in a long time, we have a lot of seniors in this program who have done a lot of things that have not been done at Duke in a long time and take immense pride in being told what they can't do or where they don't belong or what they're not supposed to be able to accomplish. I think that's really been a lot of fuel for us in preparation for this week.

Q. You dominated the fourth quarter against Virginia the last time, 28 points. What did you learn in that fourth quarter that's going to help you tomorrow as you continue doing that domination you did in the fourth quarter?

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, I would dial it back from domination. We played well in the fourth quarter. All that showed me is that we had heart. Our guys have a team -- we are together. We finished the game. But when you're down by 28 points, it's hard to say you're dominating anybody.

So it's hard to judge, right? I'm sure Virginia probably turned the knob down a little bit, which they're probably not happy with. There's nothing when we watch that tape, that we said, yeah, let's do what we did in the fourth quarter, and that would solve our problems.

What it did show is the fourth quarter is why we were able to win the next two games. That showed the heart of our team, the leadership of our team, and that's what's carried us forward and now the reason why we're here in Charlotte.

Q. Manny, your team has been in the spotlight this week with words like doomsday scenario and all sorts of negative things because you made it into this championship game. I'm wondering how you address that with your team in terms of trying to block that out or embracing the fact that there's a lot of people who maybe don't want to see Duke win because of what could potentially happen with the playoff in the ACC?

MANNY DIAZ: We love it. Doomsday scenario, nightmares, this, that, and the other. Our guys deserve to be here. I think that's the first thing. I think there's a notion like we won a scratch-off lottery ticket type deal to get here. We won by the most objective metric possible. We won the second most games in the league, and everybody else who won the same amount of games that we won, we had the hardest schedule.

It's funny, we complain all the time about the subjectivity in college football and rankings and committees and whatnot,

and this is the most objective way to determine who the champions are, and the two teams are here that deserve to be here. It's ironic that the game that will be playing at the same time, it was pointed out to me today, the point spread in the Indiana-Ohio State game is the exact same point spread as in our game.

Those guys in Vegas, they tend to know things. No one is talking about how Indiana doesn't deserve to be in the Big Ten Championship game because of course they do. I think Duke deserves to be here the same exact way. We've got a chance to play a lot better than we did the first time we played against Virginia, but our guys are really, really excited. We'll worry about what happens next next.

Q. First off, what did Coach Spurrier say in the voicemail?

MANNY DIAZ: He was just really proud. Shared some memories of '89. They were both 6-1 in the league in the shared title. Duke means a lot to him. He was actually on our campus three weeks ago, actually, the night before the Virginia game. He was on campus, was honored during one of the TV timeouts.

Duke means a lot to him. His children have come through the school. I know he'll be rooting for them tomorrow night.

Q. What would it mean for you guys to do something and win this championship, as something that would mean so much to Duke, but in the same breath, if the committee deems that you're not worthy to be in the 12-team bracket?

MANNY DIAZ: We'll deal with that afterwards. We didn't win the last two to get here by thinking about getting here. We won the last two by worrying about just winning a ball game, and because we did the things it takes to win a game, we ended up getting here.

There's a whole story in terms of what happens next, and I'll put our resume up against any other type of school we'd be compared to. Right now the task in front of us is so important and so monumental of just find a way to beat Virginia. That's really all our guys are consumed with.

But the part about winning the league, for our senior class and where Duke was when they first got here and to endure two coaching changes and to leave the winningest class in Duke history, a lot of these guys think that would be the perfect way to go out for the program, from where it was when they found it to where they are when they left it. The fact they're here in Charlotte, they have immense pride in that, and they want to finish it the right way.

Q. What is the most challenging part about preparing for a rematch against a team you just played three weeks ago?

MANNY DIAZ: Well, you can definitely outsmart yourself, right? There's things certainly that you can do better. Schematically, well, okay, we tried this, and now we can do that. You know they have the right to do the same thing, right? Then you're trying to match wits, and you can start to think three or four chess moves ahead, and you can start to chase ghosts a little bit. Maybe if we do this, we can do this and make it look like that.

The most important thing is that you just play well, right? We didn't feel like we played well in the opener regardless of what was called and whatever. Now, again, they're a big part of that and how well they played that night.

So, yeah, I think it gives everybody a rethink, but there is a danger. We talked a lot -- the NFL deals with this a lot more. We talked to our cohorts in the National Football League and how they handle divisional matchups where they'll play two every four weeks or something like that, and got some good information that we felt like has gotten us prepared better than we were the first time.

Q. Coach, you guys have won the turnover margin in that streak you had versus Cal, versus State, and versus Syracuse. How important is that to continue tomorrow after doing it versus Wake Forest?

MANNY DIAZ: Yeah, it's part of -- I told the team this morning, we're plus 16 in ACC games. That's why we're here. Everybody talks about it, this, that, and the other, turnover margin everybody understands. We've done a phenomenal job in league games of taking the ball away and not turning it over. That's going to be a big, big deal tomorrow night.

We won the turnover margin the first game, but really the second turnover we got was after the game had been decided. So it was really more even on the context of the game.

Our guys understand that. Now, how do turnovers happen? In that game we've got to play a lot better on third down than we did in the opening game. That's a great challenge because the quarterback is a really, really special player, and on possession downs he takes his game to a whole different level.

Q. I followed you when you were in Miami, then you went to Penn State. What does it mean for you tomorrow for winning this title yourself? You went through a lot of stuff between your stops to do kind of

all that stuff. What does it mean for you if you get this title tomorrow for you as a coach?

MANNY DIAZ: I'd be lying if I really thought about it in terms of what it would mean for me. As a head football coach, you just don't spend a lot of time worrying about all that. Also, this may sound crazy, you don't really think a lot about what it would be like after you win. You're so consumed with what it takes to win because winning is so difficult.

I'll just say this. The lesson in all of this and what this team has been so great at is the value of mental toughness. Stay in the fight. Success is not easy. It's usually not linear. It's hard to win.

If you look at -- Virginia is a perfect example. If you look at our Coach of the Year in Tony Elliott and what it takes to get that program to where he has it right now, there's no shortcuts, and there's no easy ways, especially now in college football because everybody's trying to win games. It's at a different level than ever before.

And that parity, until we find a way to have both teams win the same game, there's going to be winners and losers. So you've got to reward the people who do stay in the fight and are persistent.

Q. In goal line situations they'll run the direct snap to Taylor. Why has that, just in your opinion being a defensive guy, why has that worked for them, and what makes it difficult to prepare for?

MANNY DIAZ: In essence, any time -- in football it's 11 versus 11, but if a quarterback turns and hands the football to the running back, he doesn't really count. So it really becomes a 10-on-11 game. They'll snap to him, but Morris will still be an option on that play. You're making 11 guys defend 11. You're taking the numerical advantage the defense has. The player is a really good player, and he's hard to stop when it's a yard or two to score.

But that's really what it is. You're just balancing the math. It creates an extra blocker. In essence what you're doing is you're blocking a player with your quarterback. In those type short yardage situations, it's a problem in the fact that he can throw the ball, so you've got to be able to account for that as well.

Q. To start the year there was a lot of talk about special teams and kind of getting off to a slow start. Ever since the Clemson game, can you touch on how big special teams has improved and the big plays they've made week in and week out to keep you in ball games?

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MANNY DIAZ: I think our special teams have really been outstanding the second half of the season. It always starts with your specialists, right? The guys that hold the ball, your kickers or returners, snappers, holders. I think it's a very underrated matchup in this game. We are No. 1 and 2 in the nation, Virginia and Duke, in kickoff return. Both teams have returned a kickoff for a touchdown. Both teams returned a punt for a touchdown.

They don't have a specialist under 6'6". Those guys could play basketball when football is over. All those guys are monsters. The punter, I think, is fifth in the country in punting yardage. I mentioned they have the great returners.

We've ripped a -- we've got runner returned, either to the 50 or past the 50, 4 out of the last 5 games. The one we didn't was against Virginia because the way they cover kicks is so impressive. It's a big point of this game. I don't think there's going to be a great opportunity for big plays on either side, but anyone who can create an explosive play in special teams, just like turnovers, they have a great chance to win the game.

Q. It wouldn't feel right to do this press conference and not bring up David Feeley. This late in the season having to play extra games, how important is it to have a guy of his intensity and his caliber of skill to drive these players to continue to want more and be healthy as well this late in the season?

MANNY DIAZ: Dave is obviously a huge part of our success. Again, with Dave, it's all measured. He can show our guys data -- I think our little Friday run through we had this morning was one of the fastest run throughs we've had all years. Duke guys want evidence. They like to have evidence. They don't like to be told things and be forced to believe it.

So when they believe we are faster in week 15 of the season in the first week of December than we even were in September or October, that again gives them the confidence that physically they're ready to play. Now in the run-up to the game, now it's about getting mentally ready to play.

Q. First time they've moved early signing up to three weeks earlier. Curious your feedback on that and if you had any fixes for the calendar, ideas that you'd like to see this thing change to. Not signing, but the calendar as a whole.

MANNY DIAZ: The signing day the first Wednesday in December is a win because what would happen is we'd all

be out on the road this month, and everybody's trying to steal everybody's commits, you know what I mean? The kids have all decided much earlier now. They're able to sign. That gets that out of the way.

We wanted to try to get the portal recruiting and the high school recruiting separated in some way, shape, or form. Our calendar is not going to be right until we get player movement out of the season, and the little lie we tell ourselves is that we're a one semester sport, and we're not. We're now a two semester sport, and that's what's changed.

Our season always ended January 1st, the Rose Bowl or Orange Bowl or whatever, and that was kind of the end, then you had spring. We're not a one semester sport anymore. We're a two semester sport, and everybody knows the playoff is going to expand. This has happened -- the Super Bowl used to be played on January 20th. It's the second weekend in February now. If you think we're not heading there, you're fooling yourself.

So the whole reason why coaches have to be hired, head coaches -- it's not even head coaches. Now coordinators have to be hired in December and leave their teams that are either playing for bowl games or competing in the playoffs, it is because of the calendar.

Now, the changes we made -- and we did a thing we don't normally do this past year with the one portal window -- we made it better, right? There's an argument when it should be. Normally what we do, when we argue on what's best, we don't do anything, and we never get better. So it is better. I think every coach would say one portal window in January is better than the two we had last year.

Now that we have that, it still needs to get better again. The National Football League would not change players and coaches while the playoffs are still going on. College basketball wouldn't do the same thing in the middle of March Madness, and that's exactly what we're doing right now. So we've got to get player movement out of our football season to protect the sanctity of our season. That's what we're not doing.

And the people who lose on this are the kids. It's the players who lose because their shelf life is short. Coaches can do this forever. Players have a very limited time they can play the sport. Anything we do to ruin their chance at a championship or even their chance to win a bowl game because of a calendar that's controllable is unfair to the guys who we're here to serve.

There is no sport if it's not for the players. Coaches are here to serve the players. Administrators, the same way.



So we've got to do that.

Last thing I'll say on that is the final deal with that is spring practice. There's only one reason you want to show up in the spring semester, and that's for spring practice. If we will go -- there's been talk about this. If we will go again more to the NFL model where practice moves after spring -- the majority of your practices are after the spring semester. There's a whole other argument as to whether a young man should spend a fall and spring and complete an academic year at a university. That's probably not a bad idea. We are still academic institutions.

But if we take the spring practice incentive that guys need to get to their new school in January so they can get their 15 days in spring and move those days more to an OTA/mini camp structure -- the NFL has it all figured out. We don't have to invent it. Why don't we just copy the most successful sport organization that's ever been.

So we're headed there. When will we get there? Who knows? But I think that's a fix.

Q. I want to follow up to your answer on that because the one thing that the NFL has that college sports doesn't is the collective bargaining. Do you see that coming for the college athletes?

MANNY DIAZ: Well, that's the fantastic thing. Who would collectively bargain? Who would be the two people on each side of the table? I hear that. It sounds phenomenal. In terms of who would represent the players? Who would actually be representing the schools?

There's a lot of -- like I said, I'm not pretending these are easy problems, but that one in particular, there's a lot of layers to that.

Q. A lot was made in the off-season what it took to get Darian Mensah to Duke. I would argue his performance suggests whatever it was was worth every penny. How much do you think he's impacted the quality of this team, what you're able to do offensively, and just his leadership in general as you've gone through the season with him?

MANNY DIAZ: I would put Mensah and Morris in the same category. I think both players give Duke and Virginia a chance to win against anyone they play any time they run out of the tunnel. That is what Darian has changed in our program. He's changed our ceiling. Our players truly believe that, when we're at our best, we can beat anybody, anybody.

I really feel the same way with Virginia. I think Morris, not

just his ability, but again, watching him from across the sideline, I feel his moxie, his toughness. You see everyone on that sideline from Virginia believes they can win every game because that guy is playing quarterback for him. That's exactly how our guys at Duke feel about our guy.

So I believe it's a very powerful thing. Say what you want to about these two teams that are here, but both these teams have belief, and I think they have belief because of the guys that play quarterback for them. In my mind, this is one of the top quarterback matchups in the country, and I think the reason why the winner of this game absolutely, absolutely should continue playing in the month of December for the championship.

Q. I want to know who is the tallest guy on Duke?

MANNY DIAZ: Tallest guy on Duke might be -- might be Justin Pickett our offensive lineman. I think he's got a chance to be the tallest guy. That's a good question.

Q. How tall is he?

MANNY DIAZ: I think he's probably like 6'6". He's pretty tall.

Q. By the way, what's your name?

MANNY DIAZ: I'm Manny Diaz.

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