

2025 ACC Football Championship Game: Virginia vs. Duke

Friday, December 5, 2025
Charlotte, North Carolina, USA
Bank of America Stadium

Virginia Cavaliers

Tony Elliott

Press Conference

TONY ELLIOTT: Good afternoon. On behalf of University of Virginia football, our administration and staff, excited to be here. Looking forward to a fun night tomorrow night.

The team is about to arrive here in a few minutes. We're going to walk the field, and then we're going to finish up our prep and hopefully be ready to put on a good show tomorrow night.

Q. You guys sacked Darian, I think, four times in the last game. Your pass rush had a really good day at stopping the run as well up front. What did you do in that game that was so successful against their offensive line?

TONY ELLIOTT: Good question. I think it started with the opening drive. We were able to keep their offense on the sideline for a good amount of time. 15-play drive, and that obviously is never good for an offense when you're sitting on the sideline that long.

Then the first play, brought a little bit of pressure that forced him to step up. I think from there it just bred confidence with the guys, and they continued to just be confident in the plan and were able to win some one-on-ones.

I think the ability to stop the run helps you in defending the pass and getting a pass rush, but we also understand that it's not going to be that easy this go round. We're not assuming that we're going to have the same outcome. We understand that we're going to have to do a really good job because they have a really good offensive line. We were just able to make a few plays that day.

Q. It's been a while since we've gotten an injury update. Last time we saw McKale Boley on crutches, Cam Ross with the hamstring. Any update on those



guys?

TONY ELLIOTT: Cam looks pretty good. He'll be ready to roll. Boley is going to give it his best shot. Any time you're dealing with an ankle that's nagging, but he was able to get some work in practice this week. So we anticipate that both those guys will be available and ready to go and that it will be more of a how they feel once they get into the game.

Q. Tony, you guys had that string of games during the middle of the season that were down to the wire, the double overtime game against Florida State, the overtime game against Louisville. How do you think those close, end-of-game wins helped your team this year as you built toward this championship game appearance?

TONY ELLIOTT: I believe it helped us build an understanding that in our league and throughout college football you've got to be prepared to win one possession games. So going into this one, we're anticipating that's going to come down to the final possession in the fourth quarter. Hopefully, if that's the case, then your guys will have confidence in themselves to be able to go out and make the plays and not be hoping that the opposing team doesn't make the play.

Q. J'Mari Taylor, when you see his highlight reel, you'll see the 78-yard run against Duke, but how important was the dirty runs? The two, three-yard gains he hit in the first half when he wasn't getting the big numbers but kept you on the field?

TONY ELLIOTT: What it does is allows to you stay in the chains and stay in convertible situations so you can stay on the field to keep pressing to be able to hit one of those home runs.

As a running back coach, I'd always tell my guys, hey, it's the base hit. It's the base hit. You want to hit for average, and if you do, then eventually you're going to make contact and hit one out of the park.

I think he has a great understanding of that, but those dirty

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runs are what allow to you move the chains to get yourself into field positions that may be more advantageous for you to get a favorable call to create an explosive play in the run game.

Q. It's not lost on Virginia fans that there's a doubleheader here tomorrow with the basketball team playing at noon. Have you had occasion to talk to Ryan Odom this week and thank him for the confidence he had in your team to schedule a basketball game on the same day?

TONY ELLIOTT: I'll tell you what, man, it's been fun getting to know Coach. We text a lot. He's very, very supportive of what we're doing. I had a chance to watch him the other night for the first time. Man, they're fun to watch. Hopefully what they're going to bring is some of that run and gun to help us get off to a fast start in the game, and maybe we can play a little basketball on grass offensively.

No, it's been fun to get to know him, and I'm excited about the direction already for what I'm seeing. Looks like he's brought a lot of energy, different style of play that's exciting to watch.

He's got kind of a similar situation to us. He's got a bunch of new guys that he's bringing together. So I'm excited. I'll get to watch a little bit of it, but also too, I think he'll be pulling for us as well.

Q. First of all, congratulations on winning the Conference Coach of the Year.

TONY ELLIOTT: I appreciate that, but that's really a program, staff award, players award. I'm the guy that gets to do this, but really the real work is done by the staff on a daily basis down to the players, and then the players responding to the coaching that -- and the instruction that's being provided by the staff.

I know my name may be on the award, but really I don't see it that way. That's really a tribute to the staff, the players, and the program as a whole.

Q. You kind of answered my question already, which was it's been a pretty stunning journey over the course of a few years. It sounds like you've taken some time to reflect a little bit, but what does that journey mean to you now being in the championship game and having the award which is the programs award?

TONY ELLIOTT: It's a little bit surreal, to be honest with you, because I showed up with the staff back in '22 -- overzealous, big dreams, not really knowing how it was

going to come to fruition, really relying on the players and staff to believe in something that they couldn't see.

Then we went through a time that was unimaginable on many different levels but still everybody maintained a belief when the outside world probably was telling them not to. But because they maintained that belief and they stuck together and they just kept showing up every single day, now they're having an opportunity to kind of bring it full circle.

So it's really, really, really cool just to be a small part of that. I don't take too much credit because it was just a vision, but really it's the folks that grab hold of that vision and work every single day to bring it to life.

Really, really happy for our players, our staff, our administration, our fan base, our university, the Davis family, the Chandler family, the Perry family to be here in this moment because it took everybody. It truly does take everybody. So that's why I'm excited that everybody is getting an opportunity to be a part of this.

Q. Curious your review of early signing period, and if you could draw up the calendar, what do you think it would look like?

TONY ELLIOTT: That's a tough one. I'm kind of in football mode right now to be honest with you.

I don't know when is a good time. We've got so much change going on in college football right now. I don't know when the right time is.

But happy for the high school guys that were able to sign and really, really happy because it's still a developmental sport. We're always going to have to really invest in the high school student-athlete.

Also, my heart hurts a little bit too because I know with the transfer portal and clock extensions and things of that nature, some guys aren't being able to sign in this early signing period. So I don't know the answer to the question.

Truth be told, I've gotten to a place where I'm not trying to figure it out. I'm just whatever you say, this is what we're doing these six months, this is what we're doing these six months, and then just trying to do the best that I possibly can based off of the things that I hold true from a core value standpoint.

I know that's probably not the answer that you were looking for, but I really stopped trying to figure it out because the moment you feel like you're making a little bit of progress, something changes. Then I also have enough

understanding to know that I'm not in the room with the decision makers. I don't have all of the information. I've learned that over the last couple years as a head coach.

When I was an assistant, I thought I knew what the head coach should be doing, but I had no idea. I don't know all the strings attached for the decision makers, but I do know that stability is key, but times are changing. We've just got to figure out how to adapt and what is right.

I don't know what's right because there's so many different components and it's very complex.

Q. Going through the unimaginable and the way your first season ended, when you look back on that now, how do you feel that changed you as a person?

TONY ELLIOTT: That's a great question. I'm a better father, better husband because of it. My faith is stronger than it was. Got a lot more empathy. More humility. I understand I don't have all the answers, and my way is not the only way or necessarily the right way. This made me a better coach, a better boss. It just made me better all the way around.

Now there's a lot of pain involved in order to get to that place, but I also know that the good Lord doesn't make mistakes. While it was very difficult for everybody and it's not something that anybody would sign up for, it's what He had in store for us to get to a moment or an opportunity like this. Had we not gone through that, then we might not be here today.

But you never know that on the front end. So I'll just say that I'm grateful for the experience, as hard as it is, and I know that my experience is different than everybody else's experience. Each person has got to go through that, and it takes -- it has a different timetable for everybody.

I wish it wasn't as hard for the Perry, Davis, and Chandler families. I really do wish there was another way, but also too I know that I serve a faithful God that it happened according to His plan. Every day I wake up, I'm just trying to not lose sight of that because we can get back in the flow of life, and then things like this start happening and you can get to the good times and you can quickly forget some of the hard times. That's when you've got to be humble.

I tried to make sure that I stay in a space where, man, I'm grateful, I'm humble, I'm appreciative, I'm enjoying, I'm present in the moment. That's another thing that's changed. I'm a lot more present in the moment than I was prior to everything that happened.

Q. You won the first matchup. You're the favorite in this game. You're the ranked team. Does it feel like there's a lot of pressure on Virginia to win particularly knowing a Virginia win would lock up a CFP spot for the ACC?

TONY ELLIOTT: Those are the things I talked to the guys about, but not from the perspective of pressure, from the perspective of the reason why we started Game 1 as the most important game on the schedule was so that, when you get to a moment like this, you're not trying to change who you are. You're just trying to be who you are but a little bit better.

We talk about this pressure is a privilege. So we look at it as a privilege. We've taken the approach that we wanted to take control of our own destiny. So all of those things that we've talked about throughout the course of the season is really what we're relying on.

But we don't live in a bubble, so I wish I could get the guys to get off their phones. That was the instruction early in the week. Just cut your phone off. Tell your family you'll be back next week. But they live in that world.

Pressure is a privilege. We're not putting that type of pressure on us, and then we're also not looking, taking the approach that because we're the favorite, because we won the last matchup, that we're entitled to win. This football team has a good understanding that victory is earned, and it's earned through your preparation.

One of the key points that we've been talking about is I know you're going to be ready, but it's not about being ready. Everybody is going to be excited. There's going to be juice. There's going to be energy. The lights are going to be a little bit brighter. That stuff is going to be there. What it's going to come down to is which team is better prepared. That's really the approach for us.

If we take that approach, we believe all the other things that may be perceived as adding pressure will take care of itself.

Q. Your quarterback Chandler Morris has been really successful this year after coming over from North Texas. Just talk about what he means to you and your team.

TONY ELLIOTT: Chandler's brought a ton of confidence to our football team. He's brought a grit and a toughness. He's been able to galvanize the locker room to get both sides of the ball to follow his lead. He's brought a lot of fun. If you're around Chandler, especially out at practice and on the game field and during the game, he's a lot of

fun to be around.

So he's just brought a ton of energy, a lot of fun, some tenacity, some toughness, a refusal to be denied. It's just become contagious within our locker room.

Q. You've talked a lot about this season, just the belief that this team has in each other and how much they believe that they could get to this ACC Championship game. How have you seen them approach practice this week with that same mindset, and how much can that belief help them win the title tomorrow?

TONY ELLIOTT: Great question. There really hasn't been a different approach this week with our guys because, again, that belief started back in the summer. So they approached the summer workouts that way. They've just been consistent week in and week out.

This has been an extremely fun team to be around because they show up every single day. I've been around teams where you've got to pull teeth a little bit to get them going. Tuesday, all right, it's a workday. Now these guys, they just show up. Every time I walk in the team room before a team meeting, then the guys just erupt with joy. They're excited to have this opportunity.

So there hasn't been a different approach. I think the messaging has been let's not change who we are. Now that we're here, let's not change. What we need to do is we need to be who we are and then find a little bit more because that's what it's going to take on this stage.

In the championship game, you've got both teams fighting for what they believe is theirs, fighting for an opportunity to call themselves a conference champion. We know it's not going to be easy. So that's why we've talked about being who we are, but let's find a little bit more.

Q. You mentioned the impact that Chandler has had. I'm curious what it's been like to have his dad around the program so much this year. How much is he Dad versus Coach, and what has he meant to you in your career as you've come up?

TONY ELLIOTT: Great question. I'm not standing here without the impact that Chad Morris has had on my life. Taught me the offense when I was at Clemson, and that gave Coach Swinney the confidence to pass it down to Jeff and I to run it and carry it forward.

Then having an opportunity to be here, it's kind of full circle. Our first year together we won an ACC Championship, he was a coordinator, I was a running backs coach. It was kind of similar to this in that we had to

beat a team twice, the same team, once in the regular season, one in the conference championship. To do that with him and that would be the first one in 30 years for that institution, and now here we are with an opportunity for the first one in 30 years and his son and I in a similar situation.

So there's a lot of similarities, and I could say that's only the work of the man above.

Then I've tried to really just let him be Dad. Let him be Dad. You know Chad, he loves ball. He's always talking about it. He's always drawing up a play. I know he's been around the offices at times, respectfully in the right way, just kind of being a fly on the wall and learning and growing and preparing for maybe another opportunity next year or years to come.

I know Des and Taylor and the guys on offense have appreciated that, but I've kind of tried to keep it more like an I just want you to be Dad. Make yourself -- I open up the program to everybody. He's not the only parent who's out there at practice. There's several parents that come to practice every single day. That's the environment I wanted to create at the University of Virginia, truly a family atmosphere.

It's cool to see him around, and you can tell he's enjoying it. I know it's hard for him to watch the game. He has to go sit up in the top rows. Other than that, I know he's having a blast, and it's really cool for him and Chandler to have this time together, and for him to just be Dad and watch his son have the season that he's having.

Q. Tony, you had so many new players on the roster this year. At any point in the season, did you and your staff just marvel at, hey, this is coming together much quicker and much better than we thought? If that was so, what was that point?

TONY ELLIOTT: I don't know if there was a particular point, but I know I remind the staff a lot just to embrace this group of young people because they're special. What they've done is special.

It started with the core nucleus of guys, I call them the forefathers -- Jah Carter, Noah Josey, Boley, James Jackson, Trey McDonald, Stevie Bracey, Antonio Clary, guys that have been around the program for a long time. They were the ones that really helped it come together as quickly as it did because those were the guys in the locker room who said, hey, this is how we do things. This is our standard. And they held the guys accountable.

It's been really -- it's really changed my perspective, if I'm being transparent, about where we're kind of headed in



college football. Like I didn't know. I came from an environment where it was done a way where you brought high school guys in. You developed them. You didn't want to bring in guys from the outside because guys had been in your program for multiple years, now it's their opportunity, and you bring somebody from the outside to compete.

I didn't understand it because I lived a different mode of operation for so long, but this group right here really brought me some peace and some confirmation that you can do it. Now, it takes the right guys. It takes a group of unselfish individuals. Really it's what's necessary in our sport because football is the ultimate team sport. You have to be unselfish.

Externally there's some changes in maybe the approaches to the game and making it more about an individual or two, but it's really a team sport. So I was a little apprehensive, but this group has been awesome. To have 54 new guys come in and really not have any issues from a locker room standpoint -- and I think that's evident from the way these guys play, how they play for each other, how much they like being around each other.

So I don't know if there's a specific point, but when it started to happen, you could feel it. You could see it. Then I'm also mindful to make sure that I'm grateful and appreciative because it could have been different. Fortunately, it's worked out for us.

Q. Along those lines, you've kept your staff in place throughout most of your tenure. Most of those guys are still the same. How has that benefited you this season with all those new players? Then as this year's gone along, to get here?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think what it's done to help create consistency for the players that are in the program so that, when we got to the point that we were in January of this year, those players are able to go out and articulate what the messaging is for this program, what the standards are, what the core values are. I think it's important for the young people to have as much consistency as possible.

Then also for me, loyalty is big. Those individuals were loyal when they really didn't have to, when they easily had an opportunity to say, you know what, this isn't my fight. So I think I owe them that same sense of loyalty. Most importantly, I wanted to create consistency for our players so that they knew day in and day out what they were going to get.

Then also too, when you're building a program, you're bringing together a new staff and the new staff's not coming with you from your previous place, there's a time of

teaching, right? You have to teach, and you have to develop while you're still trying to win football games and get your program implemented.

Q. Will Bettridge, it was announced on Monday, he'll receive the Jim Tatum award. I'm just wondering what's your feeling about Will as a team leader, a high school teammate, as we know, the No. 41 he wears? Can you talk a little bit about Will and what impact he has on this team of yours?

TONY ELLIOTT: Will is one of those guys that I would put kind of in that forefather category. He came to University of Virginia because of the relationship with D'Sean. I went to him with a big ask, and I asked him to wear, if he'd be willing to wear that number because I wanted to make sure that 1, 15, and 41 were always visible within our program, and he chose to do it.

I know that's a heavy ask, so I would imagine that every time he goes out on the field or goes into the locker room and sees his jersey number, he's reminded of the responsibility that he has to his fallen teammate, to the Perry family, and he's got all that pressure and got to kick too. I don't know what that's even like, to go out there and have to hit those field goals.

He's done it with humility and grace and just kind of a quiet confidence about himself. Like James Jackson wears No. 1. James is always going to be vocal. He's going to be one of those loud guys. That's not Bettridge's style, but he's just going to show up every single day. When he sees an opportunity, he's going to remind the guys who No. 41 was because he knows him better than anybody because they were high school teammates.

Just super proud of him and the way that he's accepted that responsibility. He didn't have to. He chose to, and he's done it with grace and humility, a quiet confidence about himself. It's well-known amongst the team just who he is, what he's meant to the program, and the responsibility that he's carrying.

Q. How tall are you?

TONY ELLIOTT: Well, I used to be 6'2" when I was in college, but now I'm about 6 foot, 6'1-1/2". They say you shrink over time.

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